

THE PHRYGIAN CODE IN DU BELLAY'S
 "TELLE QUE DANS SON CHAR LE BERECYNTHIENNE"*

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Beginning with a Homeric comparison, "Telle que dans son char la Berecynthienne" ("As in her chariot the Berecynthian"), the sixth sonnet in Joachim Du Bellay's Les Antiquitez de Rome of 1558,¹ contains an onomastic code based on names and allusions referring to Phrygian legends and mythology. This, in turn, is related to a code of power in construction, fertility, and childbearing.

Telle que dans son char la Berecynthienne
 Couronnée de tours, et joyeuse d'avoir
 Enfanté tant de Dieux, telle se faisoit voir
 En ses jours plus heureux ceste ville ancienne:

Ceste ville, qui fut plus que la Phrygienne
 Foisonnante en enfans, et de qui le pouvoir
 Fut le pouvoir du monde, et ne se peult revoir
 Pareille à sa grandeur, grandeur sinon la sienne.

Rome seule pouvoit à Rome ressembler,
 Rome seule pouvoit Rome faire trembler:
 Aussi n'avoit permis l'ordonnance fatale

Qu'autre pouvoir humain, tant fust audacieux,
 Se vantast d'égaliser celle qui fit égale
 Sa puissance à la terre, et son courage aux cieux.²

(As in her chariot, the Berecynthian
 Crowned with towers, and joyous at having
 Given birth to so many gods, so this ancient city
 Displayed herself in her happier days.

This city, which, more than the Phrygian,
 Was teeming with children, and whose power
 Was the power of the world, and cannot be seen again,
 Like unto her greatness, any greatness if not her own.

Rome alone could Rome resemble;
 Rome alone could make Rome tremble:
 Therefore, fate's decree did not permit

That any other human power, no matter how audacious,
 Should boast of equalling the one who made
 Her power equal to the earth, and her courage to the skies.)

Background

Du Bellay is the author of La Deffence et illustration de la langue française (The Defense and Ennoblement of the French Language), the 1549 manifesto of the new generation of French poets of the middle of the sixteenth century. These young poets, several of whom had studied at the College of Coqueret under the eminent hellinist Jean Dorat, called themselves the Pléiade, after a constellation of seven stars, earlier adopted as the name of seven third-century B.C. poets of ancient Alexandria. **Like most** young classicists of his generation, Du Bellay longed to see Rome. Because of his important family connections, he was able to realize

his dream when his uncle, Cardinal Jean Du Bellay, was sent to Rome in 1553 by King Henri II of France on a special mission to Pope Julius III. The poet Joachim Du Bellay accompanied his uncle as head of his household.³

While in Rome, Du Bellay composed a collection of Latin poems entitled Poemata and other poetic works, including a book of sonnets called Les Regrets (The Regrets) and another entitled Le Premier Livre des Antiquitez de Rome (The First Book of the Antiquities of Rome).⁴ Les Regrets satirized the corruption of papal Rome and expressed Du Bellay's longing for France and his beloved Anjou. Les Antiquitez de Rome depicted Rome's greatness and past glory in contrast to the fallen state of Renaissance Rome, where cows were pastured in the area of the Roman Forum, where the visible remains of the ancient city were daily falling victim to the Renaissance passion for building, and where careful, scientific excavation of Rome's early monuments had yet to begin.⁵

The Quatrains

The opening verses of "Telle que dans son char la Berecynthienne" show ancient Rome as a triumphant goddess, riding in her chariot and wearing a crown of towers. This image recalls Vergil's portrait of the Phrygian goddess Cybele in the sixth book of the Aeneid, which Du Bellay himself had translated, probably before his journey to Rome⁶:

The second hemistich of the second verse begins a code of childbearing and fertility, which the enjambement carries over to the third verse: "et joyeuse d'avoir / Enfanté tant de Dieux" ("and joyful at having / Given birth to so many gods"). The versification, in breaking the usual pattern, recalls the wild music and orgiastic rites of Cybele's cult.

This joy in childbearing, this triumphant motherhood, and the reference to so many gods remind us that Cybele was called "Magna Mater," "the Great Mother." As the wife of Cronus, she was the mother of Zeus, god of the sky and ruler of the gods; Hades, god of the lower world; Poseidon, god of the sea; Hera, queen of heaven and goddess of marriage and childbirth; Hestia, goddess of the hearth; and Demeter, goddess of agriculture.¹⁷

Cybele was identified with Rhea, another nature goddess, of Cretan origin. She was the daughter of Uranus and Gaea, and the wife of her brother, the Titan Cronus. According to legend, Rhea bore Zeus in a cave in Crete and saved him from being swallowed by their father, as her previous children had been, by giving Cronus a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes, which he swallowed, believing it to be his son.¹⁸

Cybele's Roman name, Rhea, serves as an onomastic connection with Rhea Silvia, the mother by Mars, god of war, of the twins Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome. Her other name, Ilia, recalls the name of Ilion, or Troy.¹⁹ Du Bellay put it this way in his translation of the Aeneid:

Ille aussi qui Troienne sera,
 Du sang de Mars Romule enfantera . . .²⁰

(Ilia also, who will be a Trojan,
 Will give birth to Romulus of the lineage of Mars . . .)

The second hemistich of the third verse makes explicit the comparison announced by the initial word of the sonnet: "Telle" ("As"), with the repetition of the word "telle," introducing the comparison of the city of Rome, which, at this point, the poet does not name, holding the name in suspense and calling Rome "ceste ville ancienne" ("this ancient city").

The words which begin the final verse of the first quatrain, "En ses jours plus heureux" ("In her happier days"), break the joyful mood of the three previous verses and underline the contrast between Rome's happy past with the Phrygian goddess and the joy in her children and Rome's sad present. The quatrain closes with a rhyme in -ienne, hearkening back to the final word of the first verse: "Berecynthienne," and stressing the antiquity of the city with the word "ancienne" in the final accented position.

The second quatrain begins with a repetition of the words "Ceste ville" ("This city"), this time without the adjective "ancienne," rather modified by a relative clause: "Ceste ville, qui fut plus que la Phrygienne" ("This city, which was more than the Phrygian"). The rhyme in -ienne links "Phrygienne" with "Berecynthienne" and "ancienne."

The connection between Troy, here personified as "la Phrygienne," and Rome is present in legend and mythology, for, when Aeneas left Troy after its fall, he carried on his shoulders his aged father, Anchises (Vergil, Aeneid, Book II). Anchises, so the story goes, had begotten Aeneas with Aphrodite, or Venus, goddess of love, who came to him disguised as a Phrygian princess, daughter of Otreus, king of Phrygia.²¹ Because Aeneas brought his followers from Troy to Italy, his mother, Venus, was later worshipped in Rome as the mother of the Roman people.²²

In the verse "Ceste ville, qui fut plus que la Phrygienne," Du Bellay leaves the meaning of the comparison in suspense at the end of the verse, the sense of which is completed in the first hemistich of the sixth verse: "Foisonnante en enfans" ("Teeming with children"). The adjectival use of the present participle "foisonnante," which carries the meaning of abundance, of plenitude, is often used in connection with agriculture, as with an abundance of grain or fruit, recalling Cybele as a goddess of nature. Here the meaning is extended to include not only the fertility of the earth, but the power of childbearing; for Rome, like Cybele, was the mother of many gods, and more populated than Troy, which she was to replace as one of the most powerful cities of the earth. The word "enfans" ("children") echoes the word "enfanté" in "avoir enfanté tant de Dieux" ("having given birth to so many gods").²³

This code of plenty, of abundance, is seen in the other names attributed to the goddess Cybele. Ops or Opis, whose name means

abundance or plenty--think of the word "opulence"--was the old goddess of fertility, wife of Saturn. As goddess of sowing and reaping, she had a special festival under the name of Consivia. Just as Saturn was identified with Cronus, so Ops was afterwards identified with Rhea, and then, as the mother of Jupiter (or Zeus), honored along with Jupiter himself on the Capitol.²⁴

Tellus, another name for Cybele, was the Italian deity of mother earth, often called "Tellus Mater." Like the Greek Demeter, she was also goddess of marriage, but was most revered, with Ceres, as the goddess of fruitfulness.²⁵ Another of her names, Terra, refers to the earth.²⁶

The second hemistich of the sixth verse, continuing into the first hemistich of the seventh, "et de qui le pouvoir / Fut le pouvoir du monde" ("and whose power / Was the power of the world"), emphasizes Rome's power and world domination by the repetition of the word "pouvoir," which appears in both the sixth and the seventh verses. The second hemistich of the seventh verse leads into the repetition of the word "grandeur" ("greatness") of the final verse of the second quatrain: "et ne se peult revoir / Pareille à sa grandeur, grandeur sinon la sienne" ("and cannot be seen again / Like unto her greatness, any greatness if not her own").

The Tercets

At last, in the tercets, in a place of honor as the first word of the first tercet, the name of Rome is pronounced, to be repeated

later in that verse and twice again in the second verse of the first tercet:

Rome seule pouvoit à Rome ressembler,
Rome seule pouvoit Rome faire trembler:

This repetition of the name "Rome" is like a mirror in which only Rome could resemble Rome herself, as the twins Romulus and Remus resembled each other; and only Rome could make Rome tremble, a possible reference to Rome's fratricidal civil wars or the murder of Remus by his brother Romulus at the time the city was founded.

The name of Rome is associated not only with Rome, the city, but also with the goddess Roma (Rome in French). Roma was the personification of the world-ruling city and was first worshipped as a goddess by some cities of Asia Minor, in the same regions as the goddess Cybele. Roma was represented under the image of Tyche. Tyche was originally the goddess of chance, then the goddess of prosperity. She held a cornucopia as the bestower of blessings and, like the goddess Cybele, wore a crown of towers on her head.²⁷ Both Roma and Venus were honored in a double temple which Hadrian had erected between the old Forum and the Colosseum, Roma as the personification of the city and Venus as the mother of the Roman people. It was consecrated on April 21, the anniversary of the founding of Rome by Romulus and was afterwards called the templum urbis, "the temple of the city."²⁸

Rome was called "Roma victrix" ("victorious Rome"), "Roma invicta" ("invincible Rome"), "Roma sacra" ("sacred Rome"), "Roma aeterna" ("eternal Rome").²⁹ In Les Epithètes françaises of Maurice de La Porte, published in Paris in 1571,³⁰ these are the words given under the entry "Rome": "capitale du monde" ("capital of the world"), "orgueilleuse" ("proud"), "glorieuse" ("glorious"), "romuléane" (from the name "Romulus"), "noble" ("noble"), "puissante" ("powerful"), "fameuse" ("famous"), "superbe" ("proud" or "arrogant"), "magnifique" ("magnificent"), "ornement du monde" ("ornament of the world"), "papale" ("papal"--the only clear reference to Renaissance Rome), "grande" ("great"), "admirable" ("admirable"), "pompeuse" ("majestic" or "stately"), "guerrière" ("war-like"), and "immortelle" ("immortal").

The tercets are connected by the flow of meaning from verse eleven, the last verse in the first tercet, to verse twelve, the first verse in the second.

Aussi n'avoit permis l'ordonnance fatale,
 Qu'autre pouvoir humain, tant fust audacieux,
 Se vantast d'égaliser celle qui fit égale
 Sa puissance à la terre, et son courage aux cieux.³¹

The use of the verbe "pouvoit," repeated twice: "Rome seule pouvoit à Rome ressembler / Rome seule pouvoit Rome faire trembler," and the repetition of the noun "pouvoir," echoing the two appearances of "pouvoir" in the second quatrain; "et de qui le pouvoir / Fut le pouvoir du monde," coupled with the noun "puissance," another word

for power, emphasize the unequalled strength of ancient Rome. The equation proposed by Du Bellay's use of the infinitive "égaler" ("to equal") and the adjective "égale" ("equal") in the thirteenth verse is this: No other power could equal Rome, which made herself the equal of the earth and the heavens. The words "terre" and "cieux" ("earth" and "skies") bring us back to Cybele, "la Berecynthienne," who was the daughter of the earth and the sky.

Conclusion

Various critics have stated that the mythological references and allusions of Pléiade poetry are what have aged least gracefully.³² I, on the other hand, feel that the mythological support system is vibrant and alive. Tracing their way back to the classical heritage of Greece and Rome, seen as a light, an enlightenment of the Renaissance, the legends and myths of Pléiade poetry enrich the poems immeasurably. Through the names and allusions of "Telle que dans son char la Berecynthienne," we see both a personification of cities and an urbanization of the goddess Cybele, who is pictured in her chariot, crowned by towers, presenting a tribute to power, construction, fertility, and childbearing.

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NOTES

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¹ Le premier livre des Antiquitez de Rome contenant une generale description de sa grandeur et comme une deploration de sa ruine . . . Plus un Songe ou Vision sur le mesme subject (Paris: Federic Morel, 1558).

² Poètes du XVI^e siècle, ed. Albert-Marie Schmidt (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1953), pp. 420-421.

³ Arthur Tilley, "Dorat and the Pléiade," in Studies in the French Renaissance (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1922; rpt. 1968), pp. 219-232.

⁴ Poètes du XVI^e siècle, p. 411.

⁵ Roberto Weiss, The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), pp. 100-104.

⁶ Joachim Du Bellay, Oeuvres poétiques, VI: Discours et traductions, ed. Henri Chamard (Paris: Droz, 1931), p. 250, note 2.

⁷ Du Bellay, Oeuvres poétiques, VI, p. 389, verses 1311-1313.

⁸ Oskar Seyffert, Dictionary of Classical Antiquities, rev. and ed. Henry Nettleship and J. E. Sandys (New York: Meridian, 1957), p. 542.

⁹ L. R. Lind, ed., Latin Poetry in Verse Translation (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 46.

¹⁰ Seyffert, p. 543.

¹¹ This is the Latin text of Vergil's Aeneid, Book VI, verses 781-787:

En hujus, nate, auspiciis illa inclita Roma
Imperium terris, animos aequabit Olympo,
Septemque una sibi muro circumdabit arces,
Felix prole virum: qualis Berecyntia mater
Invehitur curru Phrygias turrita per urbes,
Laeta deum partu, centum complexa nepotes,
Omnes caelicolas, omnes supera alta tenentes.

¹² Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, ed. Diderot and D'Alembert (Berne and Lausanne: Chez les Sociétés Typographiques, 1782), X, p. 183.

¹³ Encyclopédie, IV (1781), p. 751.

¹⁴ J. E. Zimmerman, Dictionary of Classical Mythology (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 228.

¹⁵ Seyffert, p. 543; Encyclopédie, X, pp. 183-184.

¹⁶ Encyclopédie, X, p. 184.

¹⁷ Seyffert, p. 542.

¹⁸ Seyffert, p. 542.

¹⁹ Zimmerman, pp. 135, 228.

²⁰ Du Bellay, Oeuvres poétiques, VI, p. 388, verses 1297-1298.

²¹ William Smith, ed., A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology (New York: AMS Press, 1967), I, p. 168.

²² Seyffert, p. 681.

²³ In his translation of the Aeneid, Du Bellay describes the walled city of Rome with her seven hills as resembling a pregnant Cybele (Oeuvres poétiques, VI, p. 388, verses 1309-1310):

Elle emmurant sept montaignes ensemble,
Grosse d'enfans à Cybele ressemble . . .

²⁴ Seyffert, p. 434.

²⁵ Seyffert, pp. 515-516.

²⁶ Terra--"earth" in Latin. The name "Rhea" also means "earth," according to some scholars (Smith, III, p. 648).

²⁷ Seyffert, pp. 548, 662.

²⁸ Seyffert, pp. 548, 681; Smith, III, p. 648.

²⁹ Encyclopédie, XXIX (1780), p. 364.

³⁰ BN Rés. X, 1964.

³¹ These verses, too, seem to have been inspired by Vergil's Aeneid. This is Du Bellay's translation of the corresponding lines from Vergil (Oeuvres poétiques, VI, p. 388, verses 1305-1308):

Sous cestuy-cy (mon filz) prendra naissance
Rome la grand', Rome, qui sa puissance
De la rondeur du monde bornera,
Et son courage aux cieux egalera.

³² Yvonne Bellenger comments, for example, in Du Bellay:

Ses "Regrets" qu'il fit dans Rome . . . (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1975):

Nous retrouvons là une veine familière dès qu'il s'agit de la poésie de la Renaissance, et les débordements mythologiques, en vers et en prose, des contemporains de du Bellay ont été souvent et fortement déplorés. Il est incontestable que leurs nombreuses périphrases, en particulier, faisant allusion à des personnages ou à des événements aujourd'hui étranger à notre culture sont souvent lassantes ou même carrément incompréhensibles. (p. 222)

Le goût de la mythologie est sans doute ce qui a le plus mal vieilli de cette poésie et ce qui contribue le plus à l'éloigner de nous, à la rendre parfois même rebutante. (p. 223)